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THE INFANTRY DIVISION (LIGHT):
DID WE READ THE HISTORY BOOK?

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL GERALD E. THOMPSON

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In April 1982 the leadership of the United States Army announced that its two standard Infantry divisions would be reduced to approximately 10,000 soldiers, restructured Light Infantry Divisions and that three additional Light Divisions would be created. This paper traces the Army's development and testing of Light Divisions during the World War II period. The 1980s version of the Light Division is compared with its 1960 forerunner and it appears that many of the deficiencies which caused the earlier division to be rejected exist in the Modern Light Division. Questions remain as to the tactical and strategic value of having Light Infantry Divisions in the Army's force structure.

USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

THE INFANTRY DIVISION (LIGHT):

DID WE READ THE HISTORY BOOK?

An Individual Essay

by

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↑

"I know of no instance where a commander has recommended a reduction of the means at his disposal - either personnel or material - and of but a few cases where a commander was satisfied with what he had. Invariably commanders seek¹ more and tend always to make their unit self-contained."

LTC Lesley J. McNair
1943



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INTRODUCTION

"It will be an offensively oriented, highly responsive division organized for a wide range of missions world-wide, particularly where close fighting terrain exists,"² said General John A. Wickham, Jr., Chief of Staff, U.S. Army in his 16 April 1984 White Paper announcing the creation of the new Infantry Division (Light). General Wickham further stated, "From bases in the United States, these divisions will be capable of rapidly reinforcing forward deployed U.S. Forces in NATO or the far East."³ Since that announcement there has been much, and often heated, debate on what missions could be assigned to these new divisions and how they might be employed in various theaters.

While much has been said and written about deployability and the utility of light versus heavy divisions little has been written about the U.S. Army's experiment with light infantry during World War II. This essay will review the Army's experience with light infantry in the 1940's and will compare that experience with the light infantry division of the 1980's.

A LOOK AT HISTORY

In early 1942 the Army recognized that it must be prepared for a variety of specialized operations, each as amphibious and airborne, and would be operating in areas of extreme climatic conditions. The overriding question was to what extent the Army would need to organize "specialized" units to meet these requirements. The responsibility for establishing, training and evaluating these and other units rested with Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair, General Headquarters (GHQ), Army Ground Forces, United States Army.

General McNair was a strong proponent of standardized forces and was, therefore, opposed to dedicating manpower and other resources for special needs that might never materialize. "He emphasized the futility of perfecting men in the techniques of skis, gliders, or landing craft if after meeting the enemy they were not competent all-around soldiers. He preferred, therefore, to have the Army Ground Forces concentrate on production of standard units and give special training only to units which had completed their standard training, and only when operations requiring special training could be definitely foreseen. Much of the training, he thought, could be given in the theaters."⁴ Never-the-less between March and September 1942, the Army formed specialized training centers for testing equipment, formulating requirements and supervising training of special units. Among these "experimental" units were the airborne, mountain, jungle and light divisions.

It should be noted that in 1942 the light division was separate from the airborne, mountain and jungle divisions because it was visualized as

being an all-purpose division capable of being employed in many situations. As such, the light division gained the support of General McNair because it avoided the disadvantage of over specialization. The light division also received considerable support because of the need to reduce strategic lift requirements. The official history of World War II also states, "It was hoped that the light division, though admittedly weaker than the standard infantry division, would nevertheless bring to bear, in the circumstances in which it was used, as much firepower as would a standard infantry division in the same circumstances. It could be shipped overseas more readily than the standard division, would be easier to supply and maintain, and like all divisions it could be reinforced as needed from nondivisional pools."⁵

The light division closely resembled the standard infantry division except smaller. The light had a total strength of about 9,000 compared to the standard infantry division of approximately 13,400 soldiers. In addition, the light division did not have a reconnaissance element and field artillery was limited to three battalions of the very light 75-mm pack howitzers. Except for the artillery which had pack mules or 1/4 ton trucks the division had no organic transport. The idea being that the appropriate form of transportation - mules, trucks, native bearers - could be attached as the situation dictated.

In June 1943 the War Department authorized the formation of three light divisions for testing purposes: The 89th Light Division (Truck), which was the scaled down standard infantry division with attached truck transport; the 10th Light Division (Pack, Alpine), designed for mountain

terrain using pack mules; and the 71st Light Division (Pack, Jungle), to be tested at the Jungle Training Center in Panama. It is interesting to note that each of these units was in effect a special unit, hardly the flexible unit that General McNair had envisioned a year earlier.

Tests of the light division were scheduled for early 1944. Before the tests were conducted, however, General MacArthur, for whose theater the light divisions had been designed, had already rejected this type of unit because he believed them to lack sufficient firepower and to be too difficult to sustain. Regardless, tests were conducted and the following results were reported:

"Tests of the 71st and 89th Light Divisions (Pack and Truck respectively) culminated in maneuvers of the two divisions against each other from February to April 1944. The terrain chosen was the mountainous, virtually roadless, relatively warm area of the Hunter Liggett Military Reservation in California. The III Corps, which supervised the maneuvers, reported unfavorably. Handcarts, used by both divisions, were found to be inadequate and excessively fatiguing. Additional pack and truck transportation was provided during the maneuvers to permit continued action, and additional engineers were furnished to build trails needed by both mules and jeeps. Infantry regiments, only two-thirds the strength of the standard regiment to start with, employed a third or a half their combat soldiers to build trails and bring up supplies. Neither division managed to deploy more than six battalions of infantry. Reconnaissance units had to be improvised. The III Corps, concluding that the light division was incapable of sustaining itself for a period of any length, recommended a return to the organization and equipment of the standard infantry division, with transfer of organic pack units (field artillery and quartermaster) to the nondivisional pool, from which they might be attached to standard divisions for mountain warfare.

Tests of the 10th Light Division (Pack, Alpine) produced equally negative results. Personnel and equipment were found to be insufficient in quantity. The Army Ground Forces in May 1944 recommended that the 10th Light Division also be reorganized as a standard infantry division."⁶

General McNair and the War Department accepted the recommendations of III Corps. Soon thereafter both the 71st and 89th were restructured and retrained as standard infantry divisions. Despite its jungle training the 71st was deployed to the European Theaters in January 1945. It had also been recommended that the 10th be converted to a standard infantry division; however, when it deployed to Italy in December 1944 its structure closely paralleled its original specialized structure of 1942.

THE INFANTRY DIVISION (LIGHT)

The Infantry Division (Light) or ID(L), like its World War II predecessor resulted from the need to reduce the amount of strategic lift required to deploy a standard infantry division. The basic concept is a 10,000 (+) soldier division consisting of three infantry brigades of three battalions each, an aviation brigade, a division support command and three battalions of 105 mm howitzers. The single most important parameter in the development of the ID(L) was that its personnel and equipment must be deployable in less than 500 C-141 sorties.

The mission of the ID(L) is to operate at the low intensity range on the spectrum of conflict and to be prepared to move to the mid to high range. Many critics of the Infantry Division (Light) view it as being too specialized (low intensity) and lacking the firepower and sustainability to be used effectively in a NATO or Southwest Asia scenario.

Clearly, the true strength of the ID(L) is the ability to strategically deploy it relatively quickly. This ability to rapidly deploy a division size force provides the National Command Authority (NCA) the opportunity to project power during a crises and thereby possibly avoid conflict. However, to achieve the enhanced strategic mobility that the ID(L) enjoys over the regular infantry division many changes to the regular infantry division structure had to occur. It is these changes which many believe precludes the ID(L) from being effectively used across the spectrum of conflict.

The limitations of the ID(L) fall primarily within the categories of tactical mobility, firepower and sustainability. The infantry battalion in the ID(L) has little or no organic transport capability. Its limited

number of vehicles (35) have specific purposes such as TOW teams, command and control, ambulances, etc. and are, therefore, not available for moving troops on the battlefield. The aviation brigade has only two lift companies of 15 helicopters (UH60) each. These two companies combined provide only enough lift for the combat assault of one light infantry battalion. The Supply and Transport (S&T) Battalion has enough trucks to move another rifle battalion but this requires all of the S&T battalion's trucks; therefore, no trucks would be available for resupply missions. To be effectively utilized on a fluid battlefield the ID(L) would require extensive external lift augmentation--ground and/or air.⁷

The limited firepower of the ID(L) is probably the strongest and most frequently voiced argument against employment of the ID(L) in Central Europe. The infantry battalions have been reduced to four TOW systems and 18 Dragon systems, the ground cavalry troop has 8 TOW systems (HMMWV mounted) and the aviation brigade has a total of 22 AHIS TOW Cobras. The Division Artillery has three 18-gun 105 mm towed artillery battalions and one 8-gun battery of M198 towed 155 howitzers. Of course, the 105 mm howitzer has no family of scatterable mines or anti-tank capability and since the fire support teams do not have laser target designators the tank-killing capability of the 155 mm delivered Copperhead cannot be used. Finally, the Air Defense Artillery battalion has only two batteries with a total of 18 towed 20 mm vulcans. Significant fire power augmentation would be required to afford the ID(L) a reasonable chance of surviving on a high intensity, armor capable battlefield.⁸

The shortfalls in tactical mobility and firepower limits the missions which may be assigned to an infantry division (light) but the combat service support (CSS) structure of the ID(L) limits the division's capability regardless of the theater or the mission assigned. The Supply and Transport Battalion has only 33 5-Ton cargo trucks which can move either 237 short tons of cargo or 572 troops. The Maintenance Battalion is designed so that 50% of its workload must be "passed-back" to the supporting Corps unit. The Medical Battalion has no surgical capability and each of its four companies has only a 20 cot holding capability. Doctrine for CSS in the ID(L) is designed to enable units to be self-sufficient for 48 hours. Beyond 48 hours, Corps level augmentation must be provided for sustained operations. Additionally, because of the austere CSS structure, any unit attached to the ID(L) to improve its tactical mobility or firepower would require the assignment of additional CSS assets.

CONCLUSION

From 1942 to 1944 the United States Army made a noble effort to develop a light infantry division of approximately 9,000 soldiers. This effort was driven by the need to fully maximize available strategic lift. After experimenting with several structures and after extensive field testing, it was determined that the reduction in firepower and sustainability required to maximize strategic mobility was too significant and the resulting light infantry division did not have the flexibility needed for employment in a variety of situations.

Forty-two years later, the US Army again undertook an effort to "lighten" its only two regular infantry divisions and to create two additional light infantry divisions. As was the case in 1942, the desire was to develop a combat division that was rapidly deployable using a minimum number of aircraft. This objective has been attained; however, to achieve the objective significant reductions in firepower and in logistics capability occurred.

The US Army 1984 White Paper alluded to these problems with comments such as, "...light infantry forces may be augmented with tailored Corps units to strengthen their combat power and sustainability," and "when suitably augmented and task organized for the mission, they will be capable of operating independently at brigade, battalion, and company levels."⁹ If augmentation is required to strengthen combat power and sustainability or in order to operate as brigade and battalion task forces, then one must question whether or not strategic lift requirements have been reduced or just shifted to other units.

If in fact total strategic lift requirements were not reduced then the primary objective for creating the ID(L) has not been achieved. What then has been accomplished by adding the Infantry Division (Light) to the Army's force structure. What was learned from the World War II era experiments with light infantry divisions or did anyone bother to read the history book?

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3. Ibid., p. 1.

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